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ABSTRACT

As students with limited proficiency in English transition from English-as-a-Second-Language or bilingual education classes to mainstream classes, they are usually first enrolled in physical education, art, and music classes, and then math or science classes. Later, these students are placed in the more challenging mainstream social studies courses. This article examines some of the challenges that social studies presents for LEP students and one effort undertaken to increase the meaning and relevance of this core subject to students who are learning English while they are learning social studies. Social studies courses focus on the culture of American society and on activities that allow students to share their native cultures. However, social studies is closely bound to literacy skills, writing tasks are very challenging, and classes usually are not replete with hands-on and manipulative activities that LEP students can use to learn and reinforce concepts. In response to these issues, the National Center for Research on Cultural Diversity and Second Language Learning has developed a history unit for LEP middle school students that incorporates content, language, and thinking and study skill objectives with student-centered activities. The infusion of cultural diversity is another important feature of the unit. (Contains 8 references.) (JP)

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# The Challenge of Social Studies for Limited English Proficient Students

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Center for Applied Linguistics, 1993

## Introduction

The changing demographic picture of students in American elementary and secondary schools is well-documented. The fastest growing sector of the school-aged population is that of minority students. Within that group are ever-increasing numbers of language minority students -- students whose first or home language is not English. These language minority students are doubly burdened, struggling to learn English and the subject matter from various content courses.

Language minority students who are limited English proficient (LEP) are often placed in English as a second language (ESL) classes, or bilingual education classes where available. As the students from ESL classes transition to mainstream classes, they are usually first enrolled in physical education, art, and music classes under the assumption that these hands-on classes are less dependent upon language than the core curriculum classes. In general, students next enter math and/or science classes.[1] The math placement is guided by a belief that math is computation-bound and therefore easier to manage. (This assumption is inaccurate, but nevertheless drives instructional programming for LEP students in many schools.) As for science, LEP students tend to be successful in science classes that provide a lot of manipulative and hands-on experiments, especially if the teacher has been trained to adjust instruction and adapt materials to suit the academic needs of LEP students. They are later placed in mainstream social studies courses which are more difficult. This article will examine some challenges that social studies presents to LEP students and one effort undertaken to increase the meaning and relevance of this core subject to students who are learning English while they are learning social studies.

## The Challenge of Social Studies

At first blush, social studies classes seem to be likely candidates for LEP students to attend in a mainstream track. For one reason, many ESL and bilingual teachers focus on culture, even as they teach language. They help students adapt to the culture of the school and of American society. They create lessons that describe the historic backgrounds of holidays like Thanksgiving and the Fourth of July. They also plan activities where students can share their native cultures and some history from their native countries. These topics are natural components of social studies curricula and fit the needs of LEP students. For another reason, social studies is appealing because of its

[1] For more information on program design, see the curriculum guidelines for English as a Second Language in such states and districts as California, Hawaii, Arizona, Texas and the District of Columbia.

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narrative structure. Telling a story is a universal teaching method with its origins in the ancient past. All students are familiar with this approach to teaching and learning.

The reality of social studies curricula reveals a more complex picture, however. Social studies is closely bound to literacy skills. Beginning at the upper elementary level, the amount of reading and writing expected in social studies classes surpasses that of most math or science classes. Furthermore, most of the readings are expository, not narrative, in style. Long reading passages are filled with abstract concepts and unfamiliar events and names. Checking a bilingual dictionary for "representative democracy," for example, will probably not help a student who has recently arrived from Cuba where the concept is not demonstrated in Cuban society. In addition, research has also shown that many history textbooks are not well-written, often lacking coherence and cohesion between sections. (See Beck, McKweon and Gromoll 1989, and Crismore 1985, for a fuller discussion.)

Social studies writing tasks are also very challenging. In many classes teachers pay little attention to paragraph development because they may consider writing processes as the domain of the language arts teacher. Yet, LEP students frequently need assistance in organizing information within the context of an academic subject. Essays written on social studies events or phenomena often require considerable background knowledge and higher order thinking skills, such as summarizing and analyzing. Some students, and not only LEP students, have had little training in composing a summary or interpreting an event. Moreover, even though "cause and effect" and "compare and contrast" are common rhetorical styles in historical writing, LEP students may not have had experience with such writing tasks. Imagine an LEP student who emigrated to the United States two months ago, was placed in a world studies class, and was given the following for homework: "Compare the Nigerians' methods for achieving independence with the American colonists' methods." This student would be hard pressed to respond, if he or she never had an American history course before. Although these types of assignments are inevitable, a teacher needs to realize that LEP students may lack the background knowledge to make such a comparison and should make appropriate accommodations.

Unlike mathematics and science classes, social studies classes, especially at the middle school level and above, are not replete with hands-on and manipulative activities that LEP students can use to learn and reinforce specific concepts. Fraction bars or three-dimensional polygon shapes, for example, can help students grasp certain mathematics concepts, but no similar instructional tools are available for social studies teachers. Some social studies teachers are able to include role plays and diorama constructions in their lessons, but in general, LEP students, many of whom have learning styles that prefer hands-on approaches, are at more of a disadvantage in social studies than in science or mathematics.

Pictures are useful instructional tools, but teachers must exercise caution with those found in social studies textbooks. Social studies illustrations often represent the scene of an event, a portrait of a famous person, or a landform. These are somewhat helpful because they provide students with an definite image. However, LEP students would also be served from series of illustrations that demonstrate processes, and from increased use of graphic organizers, such as timelines, flow charts, and semantic webs. Representing information visually benefits language learners because it highlights important points and reduces dependence on written text. Once students become accustomed to graphic organizers, they often turn to them for pre-writing activities or for improving their study skills.

Traditional scope and sequence designs that assume social studies knowledge will expand over the grade levels also pose difficulties for LEP students who enter midstream. Under the expanding communities approach in the primary grades, concepts and objectives taught in first grade are reviewed and built upon in later years. Thus, it is harder for newly-arrived LEP third graders to catch-up when background knowledge is implicit in the third grade social studies materials and schools do not have the resources or time to teach first and second grade social studies curricula to these third grade LEP students.

Similarly, immigrant students who enter at the eighth grade level may flounder. The California *History-Social Science Framework* (1987) advocates teaching different segments of American history, covering, for example, the mid-1400s to 1850 in the fifth grade and 1783 to 1914 in the eighth. This practice, however helpful for the mainstream class that has more and more curricular material to cover, nonetheless raises problems for LEP students. Even though the framework recommends a review unit, "Connecting with Past Learnings" (p. 31), a brief review will not provide the LEP students with the depth of knowledge that many teachers and textbooks expect of them. As at the elementary level, the lack of time and resources preclude most schools from instructing the LEP students in the social studies curricula of earlier grades. Moreover, many students who come from other countries have been exposed to non-Western, non-Euro-centered histories. The school's textbook often does not reflect their different historical perspectives.

## A Current Effort

Given this difficult situation, what can help these students? The language minority students that enter U.S. schools at the secondary level do not have time to delay academic instruction. Although LEP students need only two to three years to master social language skills in English, research has shown that it takes five to seven years for most LEP students to achieve a level of proficiency in academic English that is on par with the average mainstreamed, native English-speaking student (Collier 1989; Cummins 1980). Thus, they need to begin receiving instruction in content concepts and skills early in their educational experience.

One response to this difficult situation has come from the National Center for Research on Cultural Diversity and Second Language Learning[2] , which is concerned with improving the education of language minority students. Funded by the U.S. Department of Education, several Center research projects are investigating classes where language minority students are developing their English language skills at the same time they are studying content area courses. One project, "Integrating Language and Culture in the Social Studies," focuses on middle school social studies classes with LEP students.

In this project, research staff at the Center for Applied Linguistics are investigating ways in which classroom teachers can strengthen LEP students' academic language competence, develop and implement social studies lessons that are sensitive to the cultural and educational backgrounds of the students, and promote these students as multicultural resources in a social studies class. The project aims to demonstrate to teachers that having students from other countries in the class is advantageous. The students can add information and first-hand experiences about current events, historical happenings, and geographic features in their native countries that teachers can incorporate into lessons.

The project team has also been observing effective teachers to catalog successful instructional practices; and in the summer of 1991, project staff worked with teacher consultants to develop a history unit, "Protest and the American Revolution," that incorporates many of these techniques. In addition, as the staff developed the lessons, they kept in mind current trends in pedagogy reflecting how LEP students learn content topics best. With respect to social studies, pedagogical practices indicate that LEP students benefit from instruction that:

1. offers opportunities to communicate about social studies—in oral, written, physical, or pictorial form;
2. makes connections between the content being taught and students' real-life experiences;
3. taps the students as resources for information about their native countries;
4. activates students' background knowledge;
5. provides hands-on and performance-based activities;
6. promotes critical thinking and study skill development;
7. pays attention to language issues and makes accommodations that will help students learn the language of social studies;
8. uses graphic organizers to help students represent information and identify relationships;
9. incorporates cooperative learning activities and seeks peer tutors among classmates;
10. is process-oriented and provides modeling to help students make the transition to academic tasks;

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[22] For more information, contact the National Center for Research on Cultural Diversity and Second Language Learning, 399 Kerr Hall, University of California, Santa Cruz, CA, 95064.

11. opens discussion to different perspectives of history; and
12. adjusts instruction for the different learning styles of the students.

"Protest and the American Revolution" has been designed to incorporate content, language and thinking/study skill objectives with student-centered activities. Students are given a chance to acquire and enrich knowledge individually and cooperatively through reading tasks of authentic and adapted texts, role-plays and interviews, art projects, and library research. Because many students immigrate from countries that have experienced wars and other forms of civil disturbances, the lessons are developed around the theme of protest. Drawing from the middle school students' personal knowledge or experience with protest, the lessons extend that knowledge to relevant events and philosophies of the American revolutionary era that spawned the American democratic tradition.

Another important feature of the unit is the infusion of cultural diversity. Several lessons have been created to reflect the roles American Indians, African Americans, and Women played during the Revolutionary era and suggestions are made to help teachers relate the information to student diversity. For instance, in a lesson about protest flags, students begin by sharing flags from their countries and discussing the symbols represented. In another lesson, students are encouraged to view the pending revolution from the viewpoints of African American slaves and Native American Indians. The unit also incorporates authentic materials for the students to learn to analyze. One lesson focuses on political cartoons from the time period; another on contemporary songs. The Declaration of Independence is examined in a third.

The content objectives were drawn from commercial textbooks and from documents such as *Lessons from History: Essential Understandings and Historical Perspectives Students Should Acquire* (1992) and the California *History-Social Science Framework* (1987). The language objectives promote development in listening, speaking, reading and writing skills, with specific attention to language tasks required in a social studies class, such as reading for specific information, taking notes, listening for details, presenting an oral report, and writing a comparison essay. The thinking and study skill objectives lead teachers to pose more higher order questions and fewer rote style tasks—asking students, for example, to make inferences and recognize symbolism.

The following samples will help illustrate the integration of objectives. In lesson 3 "British Actions and Colonial Reactions," students do some historical reading through a cooperative jigsaw activity and then groups share information to create a flow chart. The objectives include:

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|---|---|
| Content | Students will identify British restrictions on the colonists.<br>Students will list ways colonists protested British restrictions. |
| Language | Students will discuss historical information in groups.<br>Students will read for detail to extract information. |

| | |
|---|---|
| | Students will practice use of sequence words (first, next, then) in oral explanations. |
| Thinking | Students will recognize and explain cause and effect.<br>Students will create a flow chart. |

In lesson 12, "Paul Revere and Sybil Ludington" students read and analyze two poems about these messengers and complete a compare and contrast writing activity. The objectives include:

| | |
|---|---|
| Content | Students will identify the actions of Paul Revere and Sybil Ludington.<br>Students will explain the different roles people play in war. |
| Language | Students will listen for details and discuss poem interpretations in groups.<br>Students will respond to information and analytical questions.<br>Students will recognize rhyming words and descriptive adjectives. |
| Thinking | Students will compare and contrast two historical figures.<br>Students will analyze poems and recognize symbolism. |

This social studies unit was pilot-tested in one northern Virginia school district during 1991-1992, and a revised version was field-tested in districts in New York, Maryland, and Florida in 1992-1993. Some of the field-test sites had classes with only LEP students; others had mixed classes of LEP and English-speaking students. After the field-testing phase is completed, the unit will be finalized and made available to interested educators.

## Conclusion

Although, as outlined above, social studies can be quite challenging to LEP students, teachers and curricula must accommodate the needs of these students as they learn the content. The research project described is one current effort to address the complex issues and to make social studies teachers aware that their language minority students are important multicultural resources for the classroom. We hope teachers will learn to validate their students' knowledge and implement strategies and techniques that integrate language, culture, and content. In turn, project staff will continue to identify promising practices effective teachers use to help language minority students participate actively in class, develop English proficiency, and learn about American culture while sharing information about their own.

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